

“God’s Gifts to Jesus”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter – 15 & 16 May 2021  
John 17:6-19

In John chapter 17, Jesus prays to God the Father: long prayer; complicated prayer. There’s a lot going on there. It’s a prayer of preparation. The clock’s winding down on Jesus’ time on earth. He’ll wind up on a cross pretty soon to fulfill his mission of salvation.

You might expect Jesus to seek out assurances and comfort. After all, he was human like us. Faced with an imminent, agonizing, humiliating death, I think we’d want some assurances and comfort, and so did Jesus. Except, he was solely concerned about his disciples. Laser-focused on what was going to happen to them in the days and weeks to come. He knew they’d face temptation, despair, danger, and Jesus begged God to take care of them.

Obviously, the disciples were very special to him. While most people rejected Jesus and his message, and while some others stuck around for the miracle show and then drifted away, there was this tiny little band of men and women who followed him faithfully and embraced his word of truth. To be accepted for who you are, even if it’s a small group, means a lot, but in Jesus’ eyes, that’s not what made them so special.

In his prayer, Jesus describes the disciples as “those whom you gave me from the world.” “You gave them to me,” said Jesus to God the Father, and “All mine are yours, and yours are mine.” In other words, these disciples are God’s gift to Jesus, a gift he treasured with infinite care. What that means for us, for each of you, disturbing as it may be, is that you are God’s gift to Jesus. You are God’s gift to Jesus.

Take a deep breath, and think about that for a minute. I know it might be a new idea, a radical one. But what Jesus said about the original disciples also applies to us. So you are God’s

gift to Jesus, an imperfect gift to be sure, but one with the potential to be redeemed and sanctified by God's Word of Truth. Jesus treasures you more than any gift you could give or receive.

There's nothing under the tree on Christmas morning that compares with the joy Jesus knows to receive you as his gift. There's no gift we can offer – apart from our whole-hearted devotion – that even comes close.

As God's gifts to Jesus, we receive many astonishing blessings, like protection. Now being protected by God doesn't mean that we won't have problems or won't suffer. That's part of the human experience. Jesus was a human being who had problems and suffered greatly. That doesn't mean God neglected him. Far from it. However, we can be and are protected from what Jesus calls "the world," that part of reality that exists outside of God's grace, because that grace has been scorned and rejected by the world.

Being protected from the world means receiving the grace to stay faithful in the midst of temptation. We're still going to sin, because there's only one sinless person, and his name is Jesus, but God will shelter us from temptation and sin so that we can stay in relationship with Him and with other people. As Jesus put it, "protect them . . . protect them from the evil one . . . so that they may be one, as we are one." In other words, God's protection helps keep us whole as a community, united under a single purpose, to glorify God and serve as witnesses to his truth, a truth we know best as love.

In the world, there are powerful forces devoted to dividing us. We don't have to look hard to see these forces in action. They strive to tear us apart, and the most potent tools of the evil one are lies, hatred, and apathy. A good lie sows doubt and can seduce us into believing that there's something or someone more important than God. Lies, especially big lies, rip people into opposing camps, where each side thinks it's superior and the opposite side is idiotic or demonic.

Lies distract us. They confuse our thinking, and manipulate our feelings. The Evil One is the father of lies and the enemy of God and all things godly. We must fight the pernicious lies of the world in the name of Jesus, by acting as agents of love, which is the only truth worth having.

Lies breed hatred, animosity. They shut down love, and in a world so full of lies, we get overloaded and lose our bearings, and sometimes become apathetic. It's all just so overwhelming, and apathy is where the worse danger lies, because it's apathy, not hatred, that's the opposite of love. Hatred is a passion that twists love into cruelty and arrogance. Apathy cancels love, and leaves us without passion, heartless.

The temptation, when fighting lies, is to give up because the fight seems pointless. But we are God's gift to Jesus. We surrender only to him. To surrender to anything else betrays the very essence of discipleship. So thanks be to God that we receive protection from the lies that threaten to divide us into hateful factions or induce us to give up and dwell in the emptiness of apathy.

For through God's word of truth, manifest in Jesus the Word Incarnate, manifest through his sacrificial love, we become sanctified, a word that basically means "set apart," set apart from the world: in it but not of it. As Jesus prayed, "I have given them your word. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." We need to take that separation seriously and honor the boundaries of love. There are simply things we do and don't do, things we think and don't think when we live in the love of Jesus.

However, this separation, these boundaries, do not take us out of the world. God calls us to serve as witnesses, as beneficiaries of Jesus' love, to bring the world within these boundaries, where people can find grace to believe, where people can receive the wisdom of the word that sanctifies and makes pure, where people gain the passion to be kind and forgive their faults as

ours have been forgiven. It is through this exercise of discipleship that we receive one of the greatest gifts Jesus offers, “that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

Being a disciple of Jesus can be a rugged, frustrating path, and we falter at times. But when we are faithful by the grace of God, our hearts hum with joy. And who doesn't want joy? Well, some people are suspicious of it. Joy tends to come in little bursts, and the thrill doesn't seem to last, and then the low that comes after the high can be very discouraging. For some, joy's just not worth the risk of future disappointment. But that's no way to live, and through Jesus joy can be more than an occasional episode. Joy can be more consistent, and when joy's consistent enough, we get what may be an even bigger prize, peace.

We often miss the relationship between joy and peace, because one is explosive and exciting and the other is more mellow and calm, but peace follows joy like the sunrise follows the dawn. What's more, when we're at peace, we're more likely to experience joy, because in the security of God's peace, we no longer view joy with suspicion or fear, but simply accept it for the gift it is. Welcome to life as a God's gift to Jesus.

Of course, Jesus came with a sacred purpose, to offer all these blessings of grace with anyone and everyone, and while Jesus eventually left this world, in terms of his physical form, he remains alive in us. “[S]o I have sent them,” Jesus prayed, “into the world.” It's terribly tempting to sit around and absorb and enjoy the blessings, but that's not our purpose, and we'll eventually lose the blessings if we don't strive to share them. We, God's gifts to Jesus, have been gifted, or re-gifted, by Jesus to the world so that others may know the joy and peace and love of being God's gift to Jesus.

It's a big responsibility, one we have no hope of fulfilling on our own. But we are protected from temptation, from the lies of the world, from its hatred and apathy. We are

protected in our unity. We are sanctified by the word of truth, which is love. We are given a realm of action into which God calls us to invite every person we meet, humble in the knowledge that all we have to offer has already been given freely to us.

We are gifts sent into the world to share the good news that all people can be God's gift to Jesus, and receive the host of blessings that come with being that gift, so that all can be free from the lie, open to the truth, and ready to surrender to Jesus as his possession, the sole surrender that leads to triumph. Amen.